African Religions: An Overview

by
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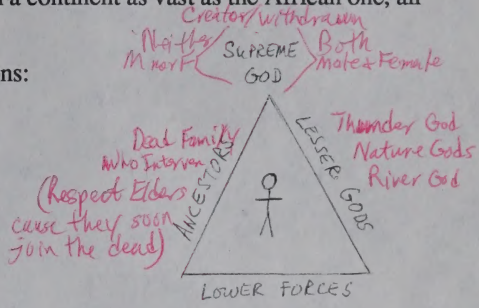
This lecture will be concerned with religious ideas and practices as they exist and have existed in various African societies, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. The history and experience of Christianity and Islam in Africa will not be discussed, although we may use the question-and-answer time to discuss what happens to African religious practices when individuals become Christian or Muslim.

Given our time constraints, we will make some general observations about African religions which will be applicable to many areas, but of course, in a continent as vast as the African one, all may not be applicable to every African society.

Five broad characteristics distinguish African religions:

1. Concept of vital force, life-force, power

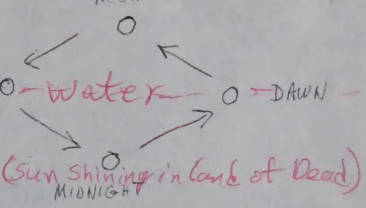
Humans' relationship to various seats of vitality may be conceived as a diagram:



2. Humanism. African religions are centered on humans and their relationship to each other and the universe. African religious practices are often described as dealing with the here-and-now, with concrete problems of everyday life.

3. Continuity. There is a sense that past, present and future are interconnected and flow from one to another.

The Kongo concept of continuity is illustrated by the cosmogram illustrating the four moments of the sun:



4. Order and harmony. There is a fundamental underlying order and harmony to the universe that humans may seek to know through divination, or through consulting oracles and spirit mediums.

5. Health, healing. Religious beliefs are intimately connected to the physical well-being of individuals and communities. Symptoms of illness must be treated medicinally, but illnesses are at the same time evidence of imbalance, of disorder, of some form of discord that must be acknowledged and made right.